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Consumer Attention to Advertising

Insights

Attention is the crucial condition for advertising to be effective. It is the focusing of processing capacity on an object (what) in space (where) and time (when). Attention has two main functions: selection and coordination. Attention selection is the first stage in advertising processing. Attention selects certain ads from among the competition of other ads and the environment, and selects specific objects or locations within the ads at the expense of others. Attention engagement coordinates consumers' information processing and choice behaviors. That is, with attention, consumers learn faster and more efficiently from advertising and make better choices.

There are several robust findings about attention to advertising:

- 1** Attention to ads is short. Consumers spend much less time on advertising than marketing practitioners and academics commonly believe. Attention to print ads in magazines and feature ads in newspapers is on average 1–2 seconds. This is much less than the 20 or more seconds that are regularly used in marketing research to test ads.
- 2** Attention can be readily measured with eye-tracking. Visual attention can be easily measured with infrared eye-tracking methodology. This methodology is widely available at relatively low costs and enables precise recordings of visual attention to advertising for large samples of ads and people. In contrast, verbal reports and memory of attention to advertising are unreliable and invalid measures, due to the speed of the attentional processes and the difficulty of cognitively penetrating them.
- 3** Attention to advertising is under managerial control. Gaze duration on a print ad as a whole increases by 0.8% for every 1% increase in its size (for feature ads, this size elasticity is 0.2%). Attention to the pictorial and brand increase only 0.3% for a 1% increase in their surface sizes. Attention to the text in advertisements, on the other hand, is strongly dependent on the amount of text: a 1% increase in surface size of the text leads to a 0.9% increase in gaze. (This is counter to advertising practice that maximizes the size of pictorials at the expense of the text.)

The visual clutter in advertisements, objectively assessed by the file size of the compressed ad image of a standard resolution (jpeg), reduces attention to the brand and the ad as a whole: a 1% increase in file size reduces attention to the brand by 0.5%.

Attention to retail display ads can be optimized such that all (national brand and private label) feature ads contained in them gain attention. In these optimal configurations, pictorials and text should be smaller, but price and promotion elements should be 60% (respectively 10% larger than current practice).

- 4 Improvements in attention improve ad effectiveness. Small differences in attention to the brand significantly improve brand memory (a 5% increase in memory for a single eye-fixation on the brand in case of magazine ads). Attention to the ad as a whole can improve sales: adjusted for their size, a 1% increase in attention leads to a 0.3% increase in sales in the case of feature ads.

Evidence Base

Multiple articles reporting research across thousands of magazine ads and hundreds of retail feature ads, collected from multiple samples of regular consumers. Attention is measured with eye-tracking methodology.

Managerial Implications

- Ads should be pretested under everyday short-exposure durations, rather than under artificially long-exposure durations, as is common in ad practice: ads that perform well under high levels of attention may do worse under low levels.
- Because of their wide availability, cost effectiveness, and desirable measurement properties, ad pretesting should include eye-tracking measures of attention.
- To improve attention to ads, less space should be devoted to pictorials and more space to the brand and text in print advertisements.
- To increase attention to the brands in ads, the visual clutter in ads should be reduced; clutter can be simply assessed as the file size of the jpeg ad image.
- Feature display ads of retailers should be optimized as a whole, such that they attract maximum attention to all of the ads for the featured products: this involves reducing the size of pictorials and text, and increasing the size of brand, price, and promotion elements.
- Retailers and brand managers can increase sales of their products without additional advertising costs by increasing consumers' attention to their feature ads.

Contributors

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